

Architecture: Space, Place, and Memory

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Abstract

This short essay discusses the dialectic relation between architecture and memory. The essay points out how architecture captures past and present memory. Spatial imagery and creative architectural design have an impact upon our reasoning and upon making sense of the world. Living in a society has an impact on received traditions and the continuing legacy of collective memory passed on from one generation to the other.

Keywords: spatial images, collective memory, reasoning, assimilation, change, presentism

Introduction

Buildings stand about as a motionless society, while not speaking we nevertheless interpret their meanings. Their interiors impose comforting images upon us while they remain standing. Habits related to a specific physical setting resist the forcing tendency to change them. This resistance indicates that our collective memory is based on spatial images. When we live a long time in a place we adapt to it. Thus the force of local tradition comes forth from this physical object which serves as its image and we imitate the passivity of this inert matter and regret if it could not last for our life time. We are not willing to abandon the district where we had resided, and demonstrate an extraordinary capacity not to adapt in a new location if we are forced to, because we feel that we will lose the support of the tradition that praises us and gives us our unique reason for existence. We are connected to our place because spatial proximity has created social relationships between our neighbours in the same area.

We can understand how we capture the past by understanding how it is preserved by our physical surroundings. It is difficult to know what space would be like for an isolated man who had never belonged to any society. The greatest number of memories come back to us when other persons recall them to us. It seems that to understand our mental operations, we need to stick to individuals. We appeal to our memory in order to answer questions by placing ourselves in the perspective of the person who asked those questions and adapt to his way of thinking.

Memories as psychic states subsist in the mind in an unconscious state and that they can become conscious again when recollected. In this way the past falls into ruin and vanishes only in appearance which supposes the existence of memory in an unconscious state. But old people are much more interested in buildings of the past but it does not follow that old buildings, buried in the unconscious since childhood regain the power to cross the threshold of consciousness only in the state of old age. However, old people are much more interested in the past than adults. We can understand what reasons he is interested in a period of his life that had been long neglected if he is put back into the society of which he is no longer an active member. However, old people are guardians of traditions because this is translated in their exchange with other old people and in teaching them to the young youth.

Greek philosophers put the golden age, not at the end of the world, but at its beginning. A great number of us persuade ourselves that the world of today has less color and is less interesting than it was in the past, which we try to capture. The mind reconstructs its memories under the pressure of society who causes the mind to transfigure the past to the point of yearning to it. We know that the past no longer exists, and we are obliged to adjust to this real world where we now live.

Sensation and Reflection

We build our ideas by processes of induction. This helps us to survive. All our ideas are based on sensation and on reflection. Knowledge can be by experience over the years. Objects have a name and we recognize other, similar objects because they have similar qualities. We can operate on them by thinking, doubting, believing, reasoning and on which basis is founded our understanding. Objects themselves cannot exist outside our minds and nothing exists at all unless we are there to see and experience it. Descartes said: "...everything is false, that nothing has ever existed; body, figure, extension, movement, place – suppose that these are fictions." Ostensibly, there is nothing to confirm that they exist except for one thing; that he personally is thinking about them so, evidently, he exists. If he did not, how could he think!

In fact, things can exist without the benefit of anyone's ever experiencing them. Everything in the world around us has been gained by experience as received by our senses. Our ideas are built by induction. British philosophers such as Locke and Berkeley said that we gain all our knowledge by experience gained by our senses from which they extracted their philosophy of empiricism. Having experienced two ideas together, at the same time or in the same place we always associate them. All the empiricists accept directly the evidence of their sensations as they occur with the residues of past experiences as recorded in their brains.

When comparing new sensation with the residues of past experiences as recorded in the perceiver's brain, the mind runs freely between them. Descartes had little respect for picturesque irregularity. He said: "...those old places which, beginning as villages, have developed in the course of time into great towns, are generally so ill-proportioned in comparison with those an engineer can design at will in an orderly fashion that, even though the buildings, taken severally, often display as much art as in other places, or ever more, yet the disorder is such with a large house here and a small one there, and the streets all tortuous and uneven, that the whole place seems to be the product of chance rather than the design of men who use their reason."

Addison states that the sense of seeing is the most perfect of the senses, for seeing gives two kinds of pleasures: firstly, those provided directly by objects as we see them, and secondly, those we still enjoy when the objects no longer there. We then have the pleasure of thinking about them. The pleasures of the fancy are more conducive to our health than those of the understanding, which are worked out by our brains. These kinds of thinking induce us the pleasures of the imagination. The imagination which cannot comprehend, because it fills the soul with agreeable surprise, and gratifies the curiosity. As Addison says, "It is that that recommends variety, where the mind is every instant called off to something new, and the attention not suffered to dwell too long and waste itself on any particular object."

There is no test of aesthetic excellence but feeling, and it is possible to discriminate between the various modes of feeling. But they are by no means universal. They depend on individual states of the human mind and on different states of culture, variations of the human mind, and variations induced by custom.

The Desire for Change

Architecture before architects dealt with architecture as an expression of a way of life rather than a historian's technique of building. It is designed by people who need not be told what is good for their lives or against them. People dwelt in buildings well before the days of builders. It is architecture without dogmas. Prehistoric man was certainly technically illiterate. He had no intention for expression nor for symbolism. In matters of aesthetics he possessed a sort of genius and more practical wisdom than one thinks. His dwelling was governed by ecological factors, and all his constructions had a sense of sublimity.

Stone Age remnants make people find it more stimulating to turn their attention to the lives in those primitive architecture. They may find their habitations were conceived with far more imagination than that of our today's urban fabric. What makes shelter fit for them is at the top of their inquiry. For them architecture is more than a roof over their heads and a box to live in. At any rate, no legend is spun around the architecture of our day which are lumped together as anonymous architecture of the vernaculars as a rule considered the human dimensions and human needs, without exaggeration and the lapse of the designer, and change for change's sake is forbidden.

There are limits to the desirability of change. Novelty causes a progressive improvement in taste as long as it is confined to generalized imitation. But as soon as novelty calls on invention to usurp the place of imitation, it begins to produce extravagance of manner and inordinate gratification of the taste for novelty leads to aesthetic and moral evil.

When Modern architects abandoned ornament on buildings, they designed building that were ornament in themselves. In promoting space and articulation over symbolism and ornament, they distorted the whole building into a duck substituted for the innocent and inexpensive practice of applied decoration, a conventional shed the rather cynical and expensive distortion of program and structure to promote a duck; mini-megastructures are mostly ducks. Pugin said it is alright to decorate construction but never to construct decoration.

Perception

Without information on what is going on in time and space, the brain cannot work. The mind must fulfill two functions, gather information and process it for easy understanding. Perception gathers types of things to be used for thought on condition that the senses remain present otherwise the mind has nothing to think with, that is concepts. Nothing is in the intellect which was not previously in the senses. That comes only by reasoning.

Architecture as an art is considered a training, as an entertainment and mental release. It includes the creative exercise of the eyes and brain which are based on perception which involves memory, without which productive thinking is impossible. The criterion for how to evaluate

perception comes from reasoning although both were established as antagonistic, while needing each other regardless of that they are different from each other in principle. They are distinguished from each other by defining the particular nature of each. According to Plato, this calls for more than the skill of manipulating concepts. The common character is not found by induction, but by mechanically tracking down elements shared by compounding these elements to a whole. But our sensory experiences can deceive us. Our architectural design are no more than recollections of memories of what we have seen around us, and include the danger of trusting the senses that force us to renounce one kind of perception to save another. All aspects of perceptions are subject to confirmation, reappraisal, and change depending on understanding.

Sensory responsiveness, therefore can be said to be a sort of intelligence. It is the capacity to obtain information. Jean Piaget had once said: "... the entire development of mental activity, from perception and habit to representation and memory, as well as to the higher operations of reasoning and formal thinking is a function of the gradually increasing distance of the exchanges, that is the balance between the assimilation of more and more remote realities to permit action and accommodation of this action to those realities."

We call this the foresightedness of a smart person. But if these qualities cannot be organized into definite shapes, one would expect that the mind would not be disturbed by being left without such input and might welcome the repose. This means that perception is purposive and selective. The characteristics of perception not only help wisdom, they also restrict it at the level of conscious perception than in sensation. However, no stimulus can be reacted to unless it is distinguished in perception by a selective reaction of the nervous system to particular features of the visual field transmitted by our eyes which distinct the stimulus from what else is commonly visible in the environment. However, at biological levels, the choice of stimuli and the reaction to them are controlled by the individual by means of taking up one thing at a time and distinguishing the primary objective from its surroundings given that it responds to the needs of the observer. This is the prototype of a cognitive response surrendered to the object of attention.

Perception is then the direct exploration of what is out there for the purpose to it fit the requirements of the beholder. When an architect has a given site to build a house he not only selects and rearranges what he finds in nature; he must rather reorganize the whole visible matter to fit an order discovered, invented, purified by him. However, the perceiving of his design is not accomplished suddenly. One has to orient himself as to the main skeleton of the work, looks for the accents in order to see whether the skeleton fits the total content or else. When this operation is successful, the work is seen to repose in a congenial structure which give meaning to the observer. This is an active concern of the mind in solving problems.

For example, the Cathedral of Reims, looked different depending on the direction, strength and color of the sunlight to such an extent that made identification difficult. The mind then seeks to peel off the influence of the sun in order to obtain the Cathedral in its unimpaired state freed from conditions surrounding it. However, the changing appearance of a landscape or building under different natural lighting conditions presents an extraordinary richness of sight. The enlightenment one gains from such varying exposure goes beyond aesthetics, and may reveal fresh information. However, it is often necessary to see the physical changes of the object as

deviations from a norm shape, these inherent changes of size, shape enormously complicate the task of visually distinguishing them from the changes due to the location of the observer and other effects of context. No view could rise if our senses were not intelligent to extricate the lasting from the changing.

Mental Imagery

To see means then is to see in relation to the setting and the observer. If a visual item is extricated from its context, it becomes a different object. A given object or building's shape may be absorbed or dismembered by the structure of the surrounding pattern in such a way that it can be discerned with great difficulty. It may detach itself from its surroundings when its structure is independent of that of its setting. Seeing consists in the grasping of structural features rather than in the indiscriminate recording of details. A building, perceived in comparison with another building, may look different from the way it would appear by itself. Therefore, perception must include mental imagery performed in the past and surviving in the memory. The influence of memory on the perception of the present is powerful on condition that the percept has a shape in itself and has an identity of its own. The mind cannot give shape to the shapeless. Recognition presupposes the presence of something to be recognized. The percept must define the object clearly and must resemble sufficiently the memory image of the appropriate category.

Breaking of the visual continuity between percept and memory norm interrupts the dynamics connecting the two. A tilted building receives its characteristic expression through its visible pull away from the norm. It looks like having generated variations under the stress of a given state. In order to design a beautiful building one must see fair buildings, but since beautiful buildings are rare, the designer makes use of a certain idea that comes to his mind. Some aspects may give the impression that they depend on the percept alone, as the formal factors of proportion, balance and unity, and these can be answered by reference to some standards in the mind of the architect.

Aristotle explaining why we need memory, pointed out that “without a presentation intellectual activity is impossible.” John Locke used the word “ideas” to describe perceptual as well as memory material and generic phenomena. He defined ideas as “whatever is the object of the understanding when a man thinks.” This definition ignores the distinction between percept and concept. Locke applied his term to sensations (simple ideas) but also to the percepts of object (complex ideas) and finally to concepts (abstract ideas).

Only with the Impressionists did aesthetic theory begin to accept the view that the pictorial image is a product of the mind rather than a deposit of the physical object. Mental images such as human figures or landscapes are evoked by abstract concepts as modesty or gravity. The visual content of some of these images are more flashes of shapes or directions, so that what is seen could be described as a likeness of the object. They commonly involve non-mimetic images.

Theoretical concepts are associated with a visual setting. The images resulting from these associations appear more accidental than they actually are. Thinking deals with perceived objects. When no objects are present, they are replaced by some imagery which is the prime mover of constructive imagination. Thoughts need shape. Thinking is a purely physiological

occupation of the brain. Words lend to thinking and operates in a visual imagery medium. The visual medium offers structural equivalents to all characteristics of objects. The variety of available visual shapes is great and it can be organized according to definable patterns which the geometrical shapes are the most tangible illustration. The principal virtue of the visual medium is that of representing shapes in two dimension and three dimensional space. This poly-dimensional space yields good thought designs of physical buildings and also represents isomorphically the dimensions needed for theoretical reasoning.

A great deal of thinking goes by means of intuitive cognition which determine the size and shape of visual buildings. Its compositional order is created in the same way. In this fashion, stable and independent concepts develop from the stable and circumscribed entities constituting the perceptual field and by solidifying the perceptual concepts the mind acquires the stable shapes. Johann Gottfried von Herder wrote: “Man gives proof of reflection when the power of his soul acts so freely then he can segregate, if I may say so, one wave in the entire ocean of sensations which rushes through all his senses – segregate it, stop it, direct his attention to it, and be conscious of his attention. He gives proof of reflection when out of the whole drifting dreams of images that passes by his senses he can collect himself in one moment of wakefulness, dwell voluntarily upon one image, observe it lucidly and more calmly and pick out for himself characteristics which show that this is the object and no other.”

Architectural Design

Thought imagery must embody all aspects of reasoning. A design on the other hand is a product of thoughts. What is not given shape is not there and cannot be supplied from elsewhere. Images contain thought but to treat images as a form of visual thinking seem one-sided. Images fulfill other functions. They create beauty, harmony, order and balance. They make things visible, but to create beauty involves problems of selection and organization. A great deal of visual thinking must be done to grasp the essential traits, to give a sense of well-being by presenting a world congenial to human needs, on condition of making the cognitive statement clear, comprehensive and coherent. One must find well-structured shapes and relations which characterize the concepts that was never appeared before in a world of complexity and to make sense of the world, involving more than the sense of sight. Only when a design speaks to the eye, it will do its best for the mind. However, as the mind grows subtler, it becomes capable of incorporating the intricacies of perceptual appearance, thus obtaining a richer design of reality, which suits the differentiated thinking of the developed mind. The intelligence of the designer will be apparent in the depth of meaning conveyed by his design. However, shapes of any architectural design, are nothing but the designer’s way of seeing the effects of actions of forces in his plans, as the cosmic architecture is viewed as being forces of actions.

The mind’s psychological tendency is towards simple structure such as the sphere whose geometrical shape follows the same law of nature which presses for balance, order, and regular shape throughout the physical universe. This is in nature of the relation between the conception of the mind and their referents in nature. Therefore, the essential features of cognitive forms exist only in mental images. Nor physical forms offer the eye more than shapes, colors, and motion.

Why the fourth dimension in architecture cannot be visualized, probably because geometry is concerned with relations that can use perceptual and physical space up to the third dimension. The fourth dimension exists only in modern physics. The modern conception of physical space is not limited to visualization. Space perception with its objects shrink with increasing distance from the observer, yet they are seen as remaining the same size. This assures the notion of consistent view of the visual world as experienced by our vision, and the human understanding.

Visual form is the principle medium of productive thinking intuition, intellect, feeling and reasoning. Architecture and science coexist but do not cooperate. If it is claimed that the value of architecture consists in developing good taste, the weight of the argument depends on whether taste is luxury for those who can afford it or an indispensable condition of life. The battle against intellectualism cannot be fought by a Romantic prejudice against the sciences as agents of mechanization. However mechanization are also present in architecture. The architect is the expert on how one does organize a visual pattern. The architect knows the variety of forms and techniques available, and he has means of developing the imagination. He is accustomed to visualizing complexity and to conceiving of phenomena and problems in visual terms.

Every visual building makes a declaration about the nature of human existence. But architecture not only exploits the variety of appearances, it also affirms the validity of individual outlook and thereby admits a further dimension of variety. Each building reflects the architect's interpretation and invention, and the understanding of the forces that shapes its existence because in architecture the image is the statement. It contains and displays the forces about which it reports. Therefore, all its visual aspects are relevant parts of what is being said. Architecture designs display their own nature and evoke man's recognition of himself.

Conclusion

Historical memory has cumulative and presentism aspects. It shows partial continuity and new readings of the past in terms of the present. Current perceived needs may impel to refashion the past. This is kept alive through a common code and symbolic canon amidst contemporary revisions. The mosque has preserved the image of its past. It has done this selectively and continuously, then a present-centered theory of the past makes eminent sense. When one deals with societies that have retained similarities over long periods of time, a presentism approach can do no justice to the intricate complexities that arise from the intertwined workings of past and present. Memory insures cultural continuity even though the picture of the past changes all the time, basic traits and values of the people are maintained. Memory comes as an episodic construction of the past. Recognition in the present is being preserved in the collective consciousness of later generations. They focus on what we call differential conditions of remembering. This affects retention or elimination in subsequent periods.

When a society is struggling for survival, it looks for examples from the past that match present conditions, so that collective memory is essentially a reconstruction of the past in the light of the present. But those who give account of the past in terms of the present will be also aware that history is made of continuity as well as change.